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WASHINGTON D.C. -- On the one-year anniversary of the crackdown on Muslim protestors for peacefully advocating for their religious freedom rights, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) calls on the Ethiopian government to release 29 individuals who have been detained and put on trial.

In July 2012, the government arrested hundreds of Muslims peacefully demanding that it cease interfering in their religious affairs and allow their community to vote freely for representatives on the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC). While most were released, 29 were charged on October 29, 2012 under the government's Anti-Terror Proclamation, accused of "intending to advance a political, religious or ideological cause" by force and the "planning, preparation, conspiracy, incitement and attempt of terrorist acts." It was the first time that Ethiopia's terrorism law was used in connection with a religious freedom issue.

"We are deeply concerned that Ethiopia's government is seeking to silence peaceful religious freedom proponents by detaining and trying them in secret under trumped-up terrorism charges. They should be released now and their trials halted," said USCIRF Chair Katrina Lantos Swett. "When USCIRF was in Ethiopia in December 2012, we met with lawyers for the 29 who reported that their clients had been tortured and experienced other ill-treatment in detention. Since then, the Commission has expressed concern about a February

2013 program, *Jihadawi Harekat* (Holy War Movement). This program, which the government aired on Ethiopia TV and portrayed the protesters and those arrested as terrorists, could prejudice the outcome of their trial. The U.S. government must increase its advocacy to ensure that the defendants' religious freedom and human and due process rights are respected."

Starting in December 2011, Muslims in Addis Ababa and across Ethiopia held weekly peaceful demonstrations in mosques after Friday prayers to protest efforts by the government and the EIASC to impose al-Ahbash, a foreign interpretation of Islam, on their community. While officials did not stop the protests for almost six months, as they grew in size, protestors reported that security forces began intimidating them and their families to discourage continued demonstrations.

The first arrests occurred on July 13, 2012, when police raided the Aweliya Mosque as individuals gathered to plan for both a charity event and protests to coincide with an upcoming African Union Summit in Addis Ababa. Protestors reportedly were beaten and arrested, with some witnesses alleging police use of tear gas and live ammunition. On July 19-20, the police continued to arrest Muslim community members, including journalists and the 17 members of the Arbitration Committee the protestors had elected to negotiate with the government. On July 21, police broke up a sit-in protesting the arrests. According to witnesses, protestors were subjected to beatings, tear gas and arrests.

Those charged include nine members of the Arbitration Committee, the editor-in-chief of the *Ye'Muslimoch Guday* Yusuf Getachew, and Habiba Mohammed, the wife of the (now former) Minister of Civil Service, Junedin Sado.